

VZCZCXRO0921
RR RUEHROV
DE RUEHEG #0237/01 0541343
ZNY CCCCC ZZH
R 231342Z FEB 10
FM AMEMBASSY CAIRO
TO RUEHC/SECSTATE WASHDC 0363
INFO ARAB ISRAELI COLLECTIVE
RHEHNSC/WHITE HOUSE NATIONAL SECURITY COUNCIL WASHINGTON DC

C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 04 CAIRO 000237

SIPDIS
FOR D (L), NEA AND DRL

E.O. 12958: DECL: 2035/02/23
TAGS: [PREL](#) [PGOV](#) [PHUM](#) [KDEM](#) [EG](#)
SUBJECT: El Baradei Returns to Cairo

REF: 10 CAIRO 215

CLASSIFIED BY: Margaret Scobey, Ambassador; REASON: 1.4(B), (D)

1. (C) Key Points:

-- Thousands of supporters greeted former IAEA Chairman Mohammed El Baradei upon his return to Cairo. Beleaguered leaders of the opposition seem relieved at their ability to muster a show of support for El Baradei and enthusiastic about his potential impact.

-- El Baradei is seen as an "independent" and viable alternative to a corrupt regime and an ineffectual opposition. However, the mainstream opposition appears reluctant to claim him as their own "consensus candidate."

-- In a television interview February 21, El Baradei criticized GOE corruption, election fraud, lack of political reform and failure to successfully address poverty and illiteracy.

-- El Baradei met with Arab League Secretary Amre Moussa on February 22 and will begin to meet with political activists on February 23."

-- NDP reaction and government media reaction focused on El Baradei's lack of political experience and doubts over his level of commitment. Opinion makers in the independent media also see El Baradei as an outsider and appear wary to offer unqualified support.

2. (C) Comment: Mohammed El Baradei's presence on the political scene remains more notable than his message, which echoes existing opposition demands. Yet El Baradei's sober and broad-ranging criticism of President Mubarak's regime, buttressed by his credentials as a Nobel Prize winner and former IAEA chairman, distinguished his message from that of largely ineffective opposition leaders. Despite his reluctance to declare himself a candidate, he appears, for now, to have captured the imagination of some section of the secular elite that wants democracy but is wary of the popularity of the Muslim Brotherhood. The significant challenge ahead is mustering credibility on the Egyptian "street." The NDP has thus far stepped back from previous attempts to demonize El, which had backfired. The real political costs to the regime of embracing El Baradei are low, but President Mubarak is unlikely to receive the returning "national hero," his criticism a personal affront. End Comment.

An Enthusiastic Welcome and Media Reaction

3. (SBU) On February 19, former IAEA Chairman Mohammed El Baradei arrived at Cairo airport to mark his return to Egypt. According to several "thousands" of supporters and activists greeted El Baradei warmly at the airport. El Baradei's return was also marked by a boost in the number of his Facebook fans -- now more than seventy thousand -- and a flurry of reporting on his return in the independent media. (Note: The El Baradei for president Facebook page is run by XXXXXXXXXXXX, son of well known Egyptian XXXXXXXXXXXX and XXXXXXXXXXXX. End Note.) On the opinion pages, journalists suggested that while El Baradei's welcome represented a hunger for political life previously repressed, they questioned the value of vague promises of change and El Baradei's real commitment to the process. Government newspapers largely downplayed the importance of El Baradei's return, noting President Mubarak had extended to El Baradei the use of the airport's VIP lounge and confirmation that security services would be present to keep the peace. Opinion pieces in the

CAIRO 00000237 002 OF 004

government owned or affiliated newspapers noted his "European style" of "brief and to the point answers," suggesting that El Baradei remained out of touch with Egyptians and unprepared for politics in Egypt. Noting that he has rejected alignment with any of Egypt's political parties they also suggest El Baradei arrived without a real "political program."

Activists Generally Optimistic

14. (C) "April 6" leader Ahmed Salah, who was at the airport, told us he was "proud" his movement succeeded in helping to organize the group of supporters, which he estimated at around 3,000. Salah said that "April 6" leader Ahmed Maher and activist XXXXXXXXXXXX, who were detained by police February 17-18 (ref A), also participated in the greeting. Despite suggestions in the press that GOE security would maintain tight order and make arrests if necessary, Salah confirmed press reports of a limited security presence at the airport, saying the police "withdrew completely" from the airport. Salah acknowledged that the lack of police made the arrival somewhat chaotic, with supporters and journalists jostling each other to draw close to El Baradei. El Baradei himself later confirmed in a media interview that he had decided not to stop and speak to the crowd because of the limited security presence, fearing people would be hurt.

15. (C) Kifaya leader George Is'haq, himself over 60, told us he had been pleasantly surprised that those on hand to greet El Baradei belonged to the "younger generation," but said others of his generation were present. Taking credit for efforts to get people to come to the airport, he noted that El Baradei's welcome marked a return to the kind of activism Kifaya had not been able to muster since 2006. This he said was the first time they were able to mobilize people without the help or presence of the Muslim Brotherhood (MB). (Note: Individual members of the MB had been cooperating with Kifaya, "April 6" and others in several campaigns focused on drawing support before the 2010 parliamentary and 2011 presidential elections, such as the Campaign for Free Elections and the Campaign Against Succession. The MB also participated in Kifaya's pro-judge rallies during the 2005 elections. End Note.) Is'haq suggested El Baradei's return fueled an optimism that had "revived" people's spirits. Political commentator, Cairo University professor and head of the Ayman Nour-founded Coalition Against Succession Hassan Nafaa told Al Jazeera English urged public pressure on the GOE to enact the constitutional reforms outlined by El Baradei and said that Egypt is now "witnessing a new wave of political mobilization."

16. (C) Civil society activist and Director of the Arab Center for the Independence of the Judiciary and Legal Profession Nasser Amin said El Baradei represents a clean slate candidate, someone both untainted by possible collusion with the regime -- like other members of the opposition -- and untouched by accusations of wrong doing -- like 2005 presidential candidate Ayman Nour. Commenting in the independent press, novelist and now frequent political commentator Alaa Al Aswani called enthusiasm about El Baradei evidence of an Egyptian desire for change, but warned that he should not be seen as a "savior."

El Baradei and the Opposition

17. (C) Mainstream opposition parties which regularly meet as what is known in Egypt as the "opposition coalition" (Al Wafd, the Democratic Front Party (DFP), Taggamou and the Nasserist Party) have not been able to reach consensus on El Baradei as a democratic activist or candidate. Only DFP leader Osama Al Ghazali Harb has publically expressed enthusiasm about the impact of El Baradei's

CAIRO 00000237 003 OF 004

return to Cairo. Harb told us the turnout at the airport was a sign of a "new political momentum" that would take "competition with the government to a new level." Harb called El Baradei the right man at the right time, but underscored that his core message was the same as the long-standing demands from the opposition. He called El Baradei an "international heavyweight" untouchable by government smear campaigns. Press reports indicate that Harb is the only member of the four party coalition that supports El Baradei as a candidate. However, there appears to be some internal debate within the Wafd party. Wafd party members from Gharbiyya part of the group Wafdist Against Succession (not sanctioned by the party) were present at the airport to receive El Baradei. That group's leader told the Egyptian daily El Shorouk that he and Wafd leaders Honorary President Mostafa El Taweel and VP Fouad Badrawy intend to seek their own meeting with El Baradei.

18. (C) Al Ghad Party Vice President Wael Nawara told PolOff that he and others in the party welcomed El Baradei's political activism in Egypt. Nawara added he would have liked to greet El Baradei at the airport, but was busy working to resolve internal party conflict after Ayman Nour's announcement on February 15 that he had been selected by Al Ghad as its presidential candidate. Some in the party, including its president Ehab El Khoully, publically criticized this move as pre-empting Al Ghad's ability to support an opposition "consensus candidate" like El Baradei. Nour's own comments about El Baradei have vacillated between statements of support and suggestions that he is only a "virtual candidate." Fellow Ghad party VP Gameela Ismail, Nour's estranged wife, was on hand to greet El Baradei and told the media she saw no contradiction in her support for El Baradei. Ismail said she would stand behind coordinated opposition support for one presidential candidate whether EL Baradei or Nour.

19. (C) El Baradei will meet on February 23 with Harb, XXXXXXXXXXXX, and XXXXXXXXXXXX and other political activists. Press reports indicate t after a clash with current President and co-founder Osama Al Ghazali Harb. End Note.)

In His Own Words

10. (C) In his first public appearance since his return, Sunday, February 21, El Baradei took part in a three hour interview on

Egyptian Satellite Channel Dream TV's program ten o'clock hosted by Mona El Shazli. Taking questions from callers El Baradei reiterated his previous statements that he never intended to run in the 2011 presidential elections but said he would run against President Mubarak if needed constitutional changes were made and it were in Egypt's interest to do so. El Baradei reiterated his call for constitutional reforms, particularly reform of Article 76 which governs the selection of presidential candidates and which many believe was tailor made for presidential son Gamal Mubarak, and Article 88 which does not proscribe term limits. (Note: El Baradei has said he will not join a party; one of the criteria for candidacy is senior membership in a party with at least one representative in parliament, but he has not ruled out running as an independent which would require the endorsement of 250 members of parliament and the local councils, likely impossible because both institutions are dominated by members of the ruling National Democratic Party (NDP). End Note) El Baradei also criticized widespread election fraud in 2005 and criticized as "conspiracy theory" that any other country (i.e., the U.S.) is capable of selecting the president of another. El Baradei criticized the current regime, specifically President Mubarak, for leadership that has led to a corrupt state characterized by a climate of fear that was imposed by the security services. He cited widespread corruption, the failure to enact reforms to address the country's high poverty and illiteracy rates, inability to address sectarian tensions, and limited space for practice of political rights as the

CAIRO 00000237 004 OF 004

current regime's legacy.

NDP Reaction

11. (C) NDP reaction has been muted. NDP MP and Political Science Professor Gehad Ouda called in a comment during the El Baradei television appearance and said El Baradei does not realize the difficulty of the situation in Egypt, suggesting his criticisms were off the mark as there are different types of democracy that might be applied. The evening following El Baradei's appearance on her show, TV host Mona El Shazli reportedly told her audience that she had received calls from the public accusing her of a pro-NDP bias and calls from NDP members angry that she had given El Baradei three hours of air time. Dean of the Cairo University Faculty of Economics and Political Science and member of the ruling NDP's Policies Committee Alia Al Mahdy, told PolOff she remains close to her predecessor Mona El Baradei (Mohammed El Baradei's sister) and believes El Baradei intends to press for change but is unlikely to actually run for president. She said that she in others in the NDP "respect" El Baradei but remain loyal to President Mubarak. She added that El Baradei's long absence from Egypt does not mean that he does not understand Egypt well enough to run but that Egyptians do not know him well enough to vote for him.

Meeting Amre Moussa

12. (SBU) In his first public meeting following his arrival, El Baradei met with Arab League Secretary General Amre Moussa whom he called a "personal friend." The meeting was reported by the independent media as having focused on the "future of Egypt." El Baradei gave no formal comment to the media after the meeting but Amre Moussa reportedly said that all Egyptians were "aspiring for change," calling it their right to do so.
SCOBET